



THEORIE COMMUNISTE 2018-11-13

CLASS/SEGMENTATION/RACIALIZATION

NONPOLITICS CLASS, CLASS STRUGGLE, COMMUNISATION, RACIALIZATION, SEGMENTATION

Originally published by Théorie Communiste as 'Classe / segmentation / racisation. Notes.' Translated from the French by LNFC.

There has always been segmentation within labor power. We must take it, then, as an objective determination of labor power under capital that naturally leads to a division of labor. Here we have nothing more than a divide between a homogeneous material and a simple quantitative gradation of the value of labor power. (Both simple and complex work undergo a kind of osmosis within the capitalist mode of production, from the generalized constraint of surplus labor to specialized labor under cooperative management, etc.). However, this segmentation would not be so if it were not but a qualitative divide within an otherwise homogeneous material. Two processes intervene as they weave together: On the one hand the capitalist mode of production is global, capable of appropriating and destroying all other modes of production while conserving for itself the characteristics of those it has redefined. On the other hand the value of labor power represents a moral, cultural, and historical component. Since capitalist exploitation is universal — i.e., because capital can take over other modes of production or make them coexist alongside it, exploit labor power together with those other modes or detach them from their former existential conditions — capitalism is thus an historical construction that brings about the coexistence of all the different strata of history in a single moment. Segmentation is not merely “manipulation.” It exists as the voluntary activity of the capitalist class and its professional ideologues, which forms and animates an objective process, a structural determination of the mode of production.

If the working class has always been segmented, it is still necessary to contextualize this segmentation. That is to say, it must be situated in the general form of the contradiction between proletariat and capital within a given cycle of struggles. Without this, the opposition to identities — identities wrongly associated with communities — would be solely *normative*. Even if we were to confer great circumstantial importance on this segmentation, its *being* lies elsewhere, within a purity that is either accessible or not. We do not escape the mutually exclusive opposition to identities simply by pitting what is against what should be.

Regarding the relation between segmentation and racialization [*racisation*], there exist two unilateral stances facing one another. According to the first, materialism boils down to reducing identity to its foundation — *without taking its effectiveness or its logic into account*. The second, equally materialist stance buttresses itself on a *refusal to consider the facts*. It says that if racial identity

is reduced in toto to its foundation, it's nothing but an arbitrary [*volontaire*] and detrimental construct. Hence, those who turn it into an object merely divide the class and promote barbarism. (I'm hardly distorting their position). What always escapes both of these stances is the question of ideology, which is not a reflection [of the base] but an ensemble of practical and believable responses. Beneath these operate certain practices. Identity comes into being wherever there is a separation and autonomization of a proper sphere of activity. Each identity or ideology — in the sense of the term employed here — has its own history and *modus operandi*, which can be ascertained with reference to the practices operating beneath the ideology in question. *Identity* is therefore an essentialization which defines an individual as a subject.

A normative denial of racialized segmentation *does not seek contradictions within that which exists, but is rather content to position itself in contradiction to that which exists*: class against its segmentation, without considering that class only exists within this segmentation (i.e., within the contradiction of proletariat and capital that provides for its reproduction). Normative opposition to the *real* segmentation of the proletariat leads to an ideological eclipse of this reality — something the Parti des indigènes de la République [PIR] does inversely, *in its own way*.

Let us repeat: Proletarian struggles are always produced and developed within the categories of reproduction and self-presupposition of capital. Struggles only ever exist as “overdetermined.” The desire for a class which breaks away from its reciprocal implication within capital to affirm itself as such, substantiating itself in pure self-determinacy, is a programmatic dream. Further, this “surplus” or “overdetermination” is not some residual deficiency or *détournement*, but rather the very existence and practice of class as it is found. In other words, it is the reciprocal reproduction of proletariat and capital — wherein the latter always subsumes the former, which then acts according to categories defined by the reproduction of capital. The fractions of the proletariat, in its segmentation, appear on the labor market as preconditioned because the capitalist mode of production moves within the concrete forms it creates (even beyond the labor market). As a result, these forms confront the process of reproduction as preconditions determining the behavior of both capitalists and proletarians, providing them with their consciousness and motives for action.

This segmentation develops its own ideological efficacy, which then divides the population by solidifying differences. And this is where the Indigènes appear as *entrepreneurs of racialization*, just as there are entrepreneurs of nationalism, elites which constitute a racket that happily was without much effectiveness until shortly ago. Critique must be uncompromising on these points: tactical homophobia, latent antisemitism, the “understanding” [*«compréhension»*] of pro-Saddam elements during the Gulf War, the scrapping (“for the moment”) of women's struggles, etc. — these are not “deviations,” which would presuppose a point of departure that was more or less “healthy.” Quite the opposite: these positions are constitutive of the activity of racialization entrepreneurs, the *raison d'être* of the PIR, which even divides a particular segment of the “immigrant” population with the term “post-colonial” in seeking to define an *essential* identity. Even if the PIR plays an insignificant role in the neighborhoods [*quartiers*], their ideological work is in line with the situation which currently prevails: “Since the mid-seventies, we have been able to distinguish three successive configurations, three ages of the banlieue. A disorganized world, but one close to us, territories reclassified [*requalifiés*] by drug trafficking and urban violence in a universe marked by enclosure and secession.”¹

We can speak of a feeling of powerlessness in regards to our relation with society, which confronts the individual as reified [*cho-sifiée*] collective restraint. Here we have the form and content of an *individual* consciousness of itself that is properly religious: the consideration of individual alienation vis-à-vis the community (which is no longer a mode of production or ensemble of productive relations) as a *state*, the inherent misery of human nature. In the capitalist constitution of exclusion, the proletariat's alienation from the web [*ensemble*] of social relations no longer appears as the product of its own activity. Nor does its contradictory relation with the rest of society seem to be something of its own doing, but rather an inherent feature of its individuality. These are just *the poor*, the plebs. Having become inherent in individuality, this separation from the community and other individualities can only be resolved through a relation which transcends all of them as something radically exterior. This is indeed the structure of religion and its production. Religion can thus reunite all the various determinations of individuality and become a powerful lever for the entrepreneurs of identities.

Every identity gives itself an imaginary genealogy, which is both efficacious and *real* by virtue of its reconstruction. However, this is also the entire problem of identity, aside from its labile, plastic, and fragile character (despite appearances). The contradiction that occurs during the phase of real subsumption also takes place at the level of reproduction. But then again, the path of real contradictions — between *normative denial* and the *enterprise of racialization* — is a narrow one indeed. [For what follows it would be useful to refer to the brief text, “An attempt to define class,” forthcoming]

The *site of production* of identities is thus the multitude of relations within which class membership is created and lived. Not all of them are strictly economic. We must add these to the *process of production*: unequal levels of development and their *mise en abyme* under contemporary capitalism, the division of labor, the historic aspect of the value of labor power, the interplay between relations of production and distribution (as well as the predominance they acquire in conjunction with the previous things listed), and the denationalization of the state. The mechanics of production applied here are diverse, contingent on factors like class membership, segmentation of the labor power, creation of the individual as subject, oppression (the “coercive moment,” which contains a renewed faceoff between labor power and capital), and relations of distribution. Here it must be noticed that the Indigènes only speak of oppression and the oppressed. Among other things, this is their way to carve out [*découper*] and produce an identity. They give form to a true logic of identity addressed to individuals for whom the defining aspect is “being cast

aside" from "true society," along with a "lack of respect." What we see here is a constant overdetermination, a constant carving out [*découpage*], of the logic of class *from itself*: this, then, is the entire problem with normative denial and the cult of pure class.

These mechanisms inherent to the self-presupposition of capital work on relations that are not themselves strictly economic, which form their material. From this work results all sorts of products: religious communities, ethnicities, races, territorial belonging [*appartenance territoriale*], etc.; the possible combinations are quasi-infinite. It's all a part of class struggle, and it's not always pretty. But we have to take part in it because it's the world in which we live. Not the world of Pure Ideas, but the bottom of the Cave.

One frequent error consists in restoring a constructed identity to its "base," i.e. segmentation, without understanding that if segmentation is indeed its base, then constructed identity will "follow" *the logic which belongs to it* and function accordingly. This logic organizes a whole worldview, and an approach to the relations of production as well. All these factors are pertinent agents for the invention of distinctions, their *variation* or disappearance. In Marseille, for instance, an Italian or a Spaniard is just another nice bowling buddy. Racialization, or the production of specific identities, does not belong to the concept of capital. (Unlike the distinction of gender, which is inherent to work as a productive force). But this having been said, race is nevertheless a necessary form of appearance [*une forme de manifestation nécessaire*]. The transformation of a social relation into a thing — in other words, a "paradoxical" subject — is at the same time the transformation of this thing into a social relation between subjects. In a sense, the subject is *heir* to the movement which creates it. This inversion is the way relations of production really act, *disguised* [*dissimulés*] as the wills and decisions of subjects.

But the whole social construct out of which this arises now effaces itself. *Racial or ethnic distinction plays its own role according to prescribed determinations for itself within the autonomy of the domain of action in which it is created*: a black man could become president of the United States, but he is still black. And a black proletarian is not a white proletarian. Existing for itself, within its own domain of action, such distinction can also be made the object of instrumental political activity. We saw this in France during the great wave of strikes in the automobile industry between 1983 and 1984, even up to today. Distinction is an ideology, and as such works well in the assignment and relation of individuals to their conditions of existence and reproduction. Or, to put it another way, their position within the relations of production. Since all of this real and objective, it can't be dismissed with the grand, ritual invocation of class. No more than we could simply demand that proletarians secede.

This is the self-presupposition of capital we have here: the reproduction of the faceoff between proletariat and capital. Inscribed within the contradictions of the self-presupposition of capital, within its contradictory existence in process, and finally within class struggle, these identities are thus plastic (in accordance with the needs of this distinction, which passes through all instances not directly economic) as well as fragile (in accordance with the capacity of this distinction to reproduce itself).

Here identities can even be *points of support in its struggle* (contrary to normative wishes), but they are *never fixed* (contrary to what entrepreneurial practices would like to make of them). Even when they are "affixed" to communities, they reproduce their core class contradictions. We must never forget that all identities are constructed, historical and fragile. Revolution, as well as current struggles like the riots in the banlieues, confront the sclerosis of class defined as a socioeconomic category. But they also confront all the identities built upon it as overdeterminations, its conditions of existence: undermining, interrogating, and calling into doubt ethnic nationality, racial nationality, etc. (2005 was not an ethnic revolt). This isn't an intellectual question bringing us back to recall who is who, since this sclerosis and the struggle against it is the practical confrontation that links revolution to counterrevolution. Class does not always appear clearly. Any such clarity is rare, as it is not the nature of revolution to announce the final hour. It is only within a multiplicity of practices and contradictions internal to capital — in confrontations between all sorts of identities, *the actions which stem from* and overcome them — that class can transform itself into a *communizing class*. Or in other words, one that is self-abolishing. No longer can revolution be the affirmation of a proletariat recognizing *itself* as the revolutionary force *facing* capital within the capitalist mode of production.

Whenever struggling as a class is the limit of class struggle, revolution becomes a struggle against that which produced it: the whole architecture of the mode of production, the distribution of its instances and levels, which find themselves drawn into a process of upending [*bouleversement*] the normality/fatality of its reproduction. This, in turn, is defined by a determinative hierarchy of instances in the mode of production. (Each thing in its own place acts as "cause" of what follows, in the order of bases, infrastructures, superstructures, etc., all of which are placed into the hierarchy). For revolution is itself this very upheaval [*bouleversement*]. Only if it is successful can it become the moment in which proletarians cast off the rot of the old world which sticks to their skin and keeps them proletarians. Men and women will do the same with that which constitutes their individuality. It's not a question of pure causation, but rather the concrete movement of revolution — in which the various instances of the mode of production (ideology, law, politics, nationality, economy, gender, etc.) one by one become the dominant focus of the ensemble of contradictions. This conjuncture designates the very mechanism of crisis, as a crisis of the self-presupposition of capital: the upending [*bouleversement*] of the determinative hierarchy of instances in the mode of production. The revolution as communization would have to nourish itself on this impurity, this non-simplicity, of the capitalist mode of production's contradictory process. Changing circumstances and changing oneself coincide: this is revolution, this is a *conjuncture*. Identities are not essences, even if they offer themselves and function as such. Pretty much everyone agrees on this point. If we consider their place and their production mechanism, the question of overcoming leads to questions concerning revolution as conjuncture: *upending* [*bouleversement*] *the hierarchy of instances and circulation of the dominant*.

It would be false to see something novel in this, something that would only arrive within this “conjuncture.” We already entertain the idea that identities are fragile in their very construction, whether these are racial, ethnic, religious, etc. Often identities include a mix of these factors, a mix that originates in the contradictions of class and traverses them.

The object of theoretical and, when possible, practical communist critique, is not the enterprise of identity. Nor is it the normative opposition, which considers terms like class and “identities” to be mutually exclusive. Still less is it “distantiated comprehension” [*«compréhension distanciée»*]. The object of critique, its target, is rather the lability [*labilité*], plasticity, and fragility of identity: historicization, “deconstruction,” contextualization. In certain situations, why not, the object of critique could even be the fact that these identities are dynamic processes constituting a particular struggle. And by way of this, a specific reformulation of the general relation of forces among classes. Why not? But even this is quite complicated. The lability of identity construction varies a great deal, in keeping with social and cultural levels. We acknowledge that this lability is stronger in the struggles that are won. Don't forget that the disappearance of racialization will not by itself bring about the disappearance of classes; it is not a prerequisite. Racialization is *also* the voice of capital.

A repeat of the struggles in France is in large part currently suspended, under a favorable balance of power, in the autonomous and particular struggle of racialized proletarians against their racialization [*prolétaires racisés contre leur racisation*]. This could not have been done simply by declaring racialization null and void. It is absolutely useless to call on individuals to defend themselves “as proletarians,” as if segmentation and racialization were not a part of their existence as proletarians. Foregrounding an identity can at once bring about its recognition and de-essentialization, however, which then passes on to an attack on certain historical and cultural characteristics being made into one's personal definition, operative agents of social and economic cleavage (because chosen and delimited). Or in other words, to bring war upon the distance that separates the official Law of equality, citizenship, and the other abstractions with which capital operates from the real rules (which the whole world knows are inverse of official Rule) and real conditions of work and life. It's not a matter of simply assuming “difference,” so as to rub it out at the same time. “Difference” is nothing more than an inferior status indelibly inscribed onto a person. We must admit that “integration” is a test no one stands a chance in passing, even less so when coupled with the “war on terror.” Break with the rules of the game, show that the official Rule is not the real rule, that racial division derived from the segmentation of labor power functions in accordance with its own needs. There is no a priori “all together.” Even if this seems “reformist,” or an “intermediary objective,” this has still not yet been achieved..

Once one possesses a *general* comprehension of the production of identities, contrary to that of entrepreneurs of identity like the PIR or that of the norm like La Lutte de Classe, everything returns to the *particular analysis of a particular situation*.

Why does such a subject make sense today? Just look at nearly all the social questions. Most struggles cannot help but express themselves in the language of identity, ethnicity, religion, and race, all of which would be sufficient cause for a response. But this does not explain the violence and tension this subject provokes in our “milieu.” Purely normative opposition to the real segmentation of class is there to stave off what would surely be the annihilation of the proletariat's general identity, which the militant claims as his own and without which he implodes. He knows his very existence is at stake concerning this issue. What a narcissistic wound it would be, to no longer be able to identify with the “thugs of the banlieue”!

ATTEMPT AT A DEFINITION OF THE PROLETARIAT

The essential definition of the proletariat is a concretion of thought that excludes no single manifestation. It is always present in each of them; *these cannot exist except in the totality of its forms and attributes*. What then is a class? Let us attempt to provide a possible definition of the proletariat as a class. Definitions of this class have always navigated two poles: a socioeconomic definition and an historical category defined by practice (in early critiques of programmatism, this ambiguity had been artificially overcome by distinguishing between working class and proletariat).

But let's start from an even simpler point: the imperative to sell our labor power. We might add that this imperative has no meaning outside *the valorization of capital*, which leads us to say that this sale for valorization defines itself both as a contradiction for capital and for itself. The sale of labor power does not tell us what the proletariat is if not seized by its relation à la capital's valorization, *as contradiction*. On its own, the sale of labor power explains nothing; it no longer defines the class, even if linked to the valorization of capital. A definition only appears when either this situation (the sale of labor power) or relation (of this sale to valorization) are seized as a contradiction by that of which they are a dynamic force: the contradiction between necessary labor and surplus labor, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the contradiction comprised by proletariat and capital. It is also capital as a contradiction in process. So we have a *unity of the definition of class as a situation and as a practice* (or “in itself” and “for itself,” if one prefers).

Moving on, if it is true that classes define themselves as a specific position within the relations of production, then relations of production are also relations of reproduction. Here the definition of class becomes complicated. We find that *normative denial* faces a “disharmony” between what is happening in any given moment and Marx's famous phrase about “what the proletariat must do in conformity with its being.” This “disharmony” not only attaches to certain momentary circumstances, but is inherent in the fact that class is objectively situated within a structure whose *conflictual reproduction* mobilizes the whole mode of production.

This implies a multitude of relations that are not strictly economic, in which individuals live out this objective situation, which they also take on as they *self-constitute as a class*.

P.S. — It would be necessary to produce this tentative definition from a particular place within the totality. Here we depart from a single pole, and not from the whole. This is not so bad, but it is a bit inconvenient.²

- 1. Michel Kokoreff et Didier Lapeyronnie, *Refaire la cité, l'avenir des banlieues*, Ed. Le Seuil
- 2. Original, in French, here: <http://blogtc.communisation.net/?p=130>
- taken from here

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER